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The Structured Interview

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Summary

"Employee selection is usually a lottery, and interviews are not the best forum for checking the right person". This is a recent claim by a United Kingdom firm of recruitment consultants which advocates its own assessment centre as the way ahead for graduate recruitment.

Research by another recruitment group, Robert Half International, indicates that it takes only a matter of minutes for the interviewer to decide whether the body on the other side of the desk is the right person for the job. This research indicated that more than 20% of managers who were interviewed claimed that they could make up their minds about a candidate within one to five minutes. A further 45% believed that they were able to sum up a person's suitability in under 15 minutes. If these figures are correct, then clearly the way the candidate walks, dresses and how the body language shapes up for the first handshake, can all have a major effect on deciding which way a career and life-changing interview may go. Headhunters and executive search specialists all report that, however well-intentioned, objective and scientific the interview system, there are certain prejudices which can never be eradicated. For instance, for most there is a natural preference for working with good-looking people. Significantly, it is no coincidence that there are disproportionately few good-looking people doing menial jobs.

It is current fashion therefore to discredit the interview as a means of selection. However, the Royal Air Force uses a structured interview as an initial assessment procedure and also as a useful filter for candidates seen as less able. Following interview, candidates are graded on a scale of one (lowest) to 7 (highest). Statistical analysis of successful officer candidates shows a persuasive correlation between interview grades and the quality of success during officer training. The Royal Air Force is of the firm opinion that the structured interview remains a successful yardstick and tool during officer selection. How is this so?

1. First and foremost, the interviewers, who always have a wealth of general military experience, are formally trained interviewers. The Interview Board consists of 2 senior officers.
2. Secondly, the interview is specifically structured and tailored to elicit an accurate picture of the candidate, *vis-à-vis* his/her suitability for officer training.
3. Following the interview, where there is a difference of opinion, the differences are discussed and a compromise agreement is reached. Where there is no compromise (and this is rare) differences are recorded and then independently reviewed.
4. The Interview Boards are subjected to regular standardization checks by an independent board of assessors.

Experience has shown that the structured interview carried out by 2 formally trained officers, has a high degree of objectivity. The interview lasts for 45 minutes and all of that time is essential, plus later discussion between Board Members, to formulate an overall opinion and assessment.

Within the Royal Air Force Officer and Aircrew Selection Centre, the structured interview remains an integral and accurate method of assessment.

The Structured Interview

What is meant by a structured interview? Simply, it is that the interview is designed around a *format*. This format enables the interviewers to extract all relevant information from the candidate and, at the same time, identify many of the useful *skills, qualities* and *traits* which are considered either to be essential or desirable in a

potential officer. At the same time, the structure of the interview can also highlight weaknesses which would reduce the candidate's trainability and potential.

It must be emphasized that the "structure" is not a simple list of questions which the interviewers adhere to. Indeed, there is no list. The structure enables free-flow dialogue between interviewer and interviewee and, as the interview progresses, the qualities good or bad are noted as they materialize. Furthermore, preparation for any interview is vital. It is possible to prepare a great deal from the candidate's dossier. The candidate's dossier, which has been prepared by support staff over many weeks prior to the interview, should include the following:

1. The candidate's *curriculum vitae*.
2. References obtained from employers/colleges/ schools.
3. Personal references (usually of limited value).
4. Medical record/history.
5. The candidate's application form.
6. Academic qualifications (checked and certified).

The application form itself is a particularly useful tool to set the scene. It should include:

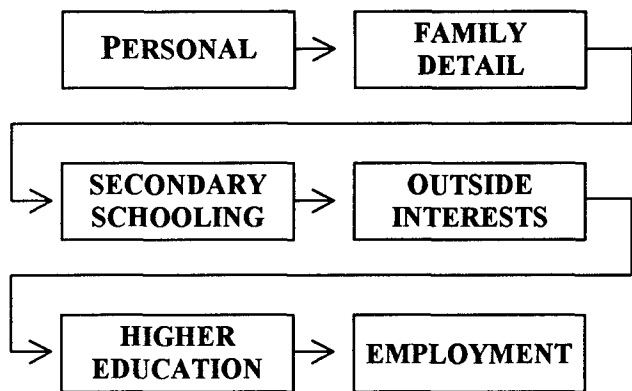
1. Date and place of birth (verified).
2. Academic History - Basic qualifications/
involvement/sporting
interests at school and college
- Further Education at college/
university plus involvement
- Part-time Study
3. Employment Record.
4. Civil/police prosecutions.
5. Sporting involvement, hobbies and interests.

Record of significant detail has to be extracted and recorded on a set of easy-to-use Interview Forms. Further recording is then made on these forms as the interview progresses in order to complete the picture.

To be effective, the Interview Board *must* consist of 2 officers. The flow, even rapport with the interview would be lost by pregnant pauses if the interviewer had to slow to take notes. Thus, within any structured interview, one colleague talks whilst the other one takes notes. The Royal Air Force has found that this technique works very well although, in order to get a balanced opinion and feel for the candidate, the Boarding Officers change roles half-way through the interview. The note-taker becomes the interviewer and *vice versa*.

The basic structure of the interview is as follows in more detail.

1. One officer collects the candidate from the reception area and escorts him/her to the interview room. Whilst it is easy to form a first impression during this short phase, this has to be avoided, save for an objective perusal of the candidate's attire, bearing and general demeanour.
2. The candidate is settled into the interview after introducing the second colleague. The structured part of the interview can then begin and a simple, discreetly concealed, card is used as a reminder of the interview design and questioning progression. The interview follows this broad format:

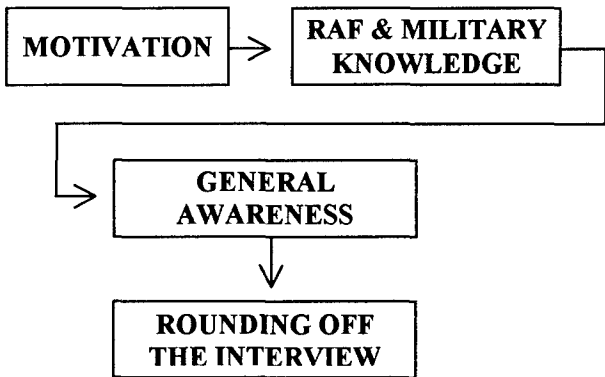


3. At Annex A is a typical card. Within it there are many headings in order to prompt questions. The candidate's answers are added, where necessary, to embellish the Interview Forms.

Whilst the interviewer and the candidate are locked into the questions and answers elicited from the structure as detailed on the card, the other colleague records the extra detail, adding meat to the information which was gained during pre-interview preparation. *However*, and this is the *vital* part of the whole process, a record is also made by the non-interviewer of *impressions* and a separate list of *qualities*, *skills* and *observations* is made. The form is simple. At Annex B is an example.

The form is very easy to use. It is a simple matter of recording the 'qualities' noted, good or bad, on the form. In order to give some sort of weight also to the 9 separate headings, each block is given a score on the right of the form. In this instance, a score of 1 is regarded as '*very poor*', whereas 9 is '*exceptional*'. Generally, 5, which is in the middle, is regarded as satisfactory. Clearly, the more qualities that are recorded in the left hand 'plus' column, then the higher the score. As an example, 2 plus 'qualities' and 2 negative 'qualities' will probably justify a score of 5, that is, a satisfactory overall balance. On the left-hand side of the form are some useful words which act as a reminder. The interviewers are not bound by the words, however, and can use other descriptions when and as appropriate.

Half-way through the interview (usually after about 25 minutes) the Board will have formed a pen picture of the candidate. The interviewers then change. The paperwork is passed over, and the second interviewer then looks more closely at the applicant's **Motivation**, **RAF Knowledge** and **General Awareness**. This second part usually takes about 20 minutes and, as before, there is no specific list of questions. Although it usually follows this format:



Again, a reminder card gives headings and guides in order to develop the questions. At Annex C is an example.

Whilst the second interviewer is questioning, the first interviewer continues to record on the sheet *qualities* and *any additional comment*. In addition, he checks and confirms (or even notes disagreements) the qualities noted in the first part of the interview. He will also add his own impressions. This double-check goes a great way to removing individual subjectivity. There are also 3 other boxes on the recording sheet which the recorder

completes during the second part of the interview. He will also 'score' these 3 boxes, recording his observations on the candidate's *Awareness, Motivation and Overall Impact*.

The interview is completed by asking the candidate what other applications for employment he might have generated and also what would his intentions be if unsuccessful with this application. He/she is then given the opportunity to ask questions of the Board, but this is limited by the caveat "within the context of the interview".

So, the interview is then complete. It must again be emphasized that there is no specific list of questions. However, it is worth mentioning, at this point, a simple questioning technique. Wherever possible, *indirect* questions are used; that is, each question starting with words such as *when* (dates), *where?* *who?* *why?* *how long?* *how often?* This ensures that the candidate cannot respond with the simple answer Yes or No. After all, one of the objects of the interview is to get the candidate talking.

When the candidate has left, the Board Members discuss the qualities recorded. It is surprising how close the opinion is in the vast majority of occasions. Where differences cannot be resolved, record is made, although the senior Board Member's overall score is naturally final. Almost always, discussion between the colleagues resolves the differing opinions.

So, now there is a completed scoring sheet. It is then possible to come up with a **Board Grade**. An equal balance of strengths and weaknesses would lead to a satisfactory grade (or 'score'). More positive qualities would increase the Board Grade. In the Royal Air Force system, a Board Grade of 1 is 'very poor', increasing score only up to a maximum Board Grade of 7 (ie 'exceptional'). Incidentally, the final Board Grade of 7 is on a different scale to the 1 to 9 seen on the scoring sheet.

There are definitions to help us define the Final Board Grade. At Annex D is a completed form which is an example of a very high Board Grade. It can be seen that there is a preponderance of positive scores on the left.

Conversely, at Annex E is an example of a very weak candidate who would not be acceptable. Note that there is a preponderance of weaknesses listed on the right-hand side.

Verification of the Royal Air Force Interview Procedure

Candidates can be tracked through to and beyond Initial Officer Training as the Department of Initial Officer Training is located on the same base as the Officer and Aircrew Selection Centre at the Royal Air Force College Cranwell. In order to demonstrate the validity to the Structured Interview, the Board Grades of consequential Officer Cadet Prize Winners over a period of 18 months are included at Annex F. This indicates quite substantial accuracy of the Structured Interview in identifying *potential*.

It can be seen that the percentage of Board Grades 5 and 6 is very small, yet there is a significant preponderance of higher Board Grades amongst the Prize Winners. The Royal Air Force remains confident that their interview system, using a Structured Interview, is not only **objective** but is also **accurate** and **effective** in predicting not just *success* in Initial Officer Training, but also *quality*.

To conclude then, in the RAF's selection procedure, the interview is only the first stage. It acts as a useful filter to weed out the poor candidates – perhaps about 25% of applicants invited for interview. The remainder of the candidates then proceed to the next stage of the selection procedure, where they are grouped in syndicates of 5 or 6 to expose them to a selection of group exercises. Their performance is again monitored and scored and this second score, together with the performance seen at interview, is used to make the final selection. Overall validation of the system can be gauged by a very low, eventual failure rate during Initial Officer Training.

The Interview Card - Part 1

WHEN (DATES)?	WHERE?	WHO?	WHAT?	WHY?	HOW LONG?	HOW OFTEN?
PERSONAL WHEN BORN HOW OLD WHERE BORN WHERE LIVING NOW HOW LONG WHERE ELSE LIVED		FAMILY HOW MANY/CONSIST OF POSITION FATHER DO/MOTHER DO HOW DESCRIBE HOME LIFE VIEW MARRIAGE/PLANS FAMILY SERVICE LINKS		SCHOOLS NO PRIMARY/NO SECONDARY NAME(S)/TYPE SECONDARY TRANSFER DATES (SECONDARY) SIZE B/G MIX DISTANCE HOME/TRAVEL		
INSIDE SCHOOL (Group together if 2+) EXAMS AVAILABLE WHICH TYPES TAKEN DATE/NO/NO PASSED A+EQUIV SUBJECTS GRADES HOW FEEL/HOW HARD HOW STUDENTS HELP SPORTS CLUBS/SOCIETIES UNIFORMED/CCF ADV TRG DofE OTHER ACTIVITIES TRAVEL (GAPS)		OUTSIDE INTERESTS (During School days) SPORTS YOUTH ORGS: ATC-SCOUTS- BB-GG-Y/CLUB HOBBIES/INTERESTS OTHER ACTIVITIES HOW FINANCED/PT JOBS SCHOOL HOLIDAYS TRAVEL AMBITIONS/CAREER ADVICE (GAPS)		HIGHER EDUCATION WHERE/REASON FOR CHOICE COURSE/TYPE/DATES ACADEMICS HOW FEEL/HOW HARD WHERE LIVED/GRANT HOW MANAGE FINANCIALLY LOANS/OVERDRAFTS UNIVERSITY/COLL LIFE SPORTS SOCIETIES/UAS/OTC STAS VACATIONS/JOBS/TRAVEL (GAPS)		EMPLOYMENT HOW MANY/WHAT JOBS DATES RESPONSIBILITIES WHY LEFT PRESENT PAY COMMITMENTS FE/COURSES/TRAVEL SOCIAL/SPORTS SPORTS CLUBS/COCITIES FE/STAs/COMMUN INVOLVE HOLIDAYS/TRAVEL (GAPS)
MANDATORY						
DRUGS	SEEN/INVOLVEMENT/VIEWS	1. POLICE 2. OTHER PROSEC		DATE/COURT/OFFENCE/RESULT		
SERVICE DISCIPLINE		(SEE CARD)		GAPS HIGH/LOW		

ANNEX B

The Interview Scoring Sheet
Impressions - Qualities - Skills - Observations

APPEARANCE AND BEARING Build, Bearing, Dress, Grooming	+	-	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
MANNER Confidence, Composure, Poise, Polish, Alertness, Sense of occasion, Humour, Courtesy	+	-	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
SPEECH AND POWER OF EXPRESSION Vocabulary, Fluency, Diction, Lucidity, Logic, Conviction, Persuasiveness, Projection, Animation, Effectiveness	+	-	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
ACTIVITIES/INTERESTS Range/Type, Sense of purpose, Adventure, responsibility, Involvement, tenacity, Dedication, Determination, Initiative, Independence, Enterprise, Social awareness, Commitment, Cultural balance, Compatibility	+	-	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
ACADEMIC LEVEL/POTENTIAL How well qualified for IOT/desired branch, Determination, Further potential, Ease of obtaining qualification, Attitude to studies	+	-	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
PHYSICAL LEVEL/POTENTIAL How well prepared physically for IOT, Fitness, Sporting Prowess, Ruggedness, Adventure, Endurance, Determination, Frequency of Exercise, Attitude to Fitness	+	-	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
AWARENESS Interests in / Awareness of military/current affairs. Maturity of views, Ability to reason, Originality of views, Relate to age	+	-	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
MOTIVATION Motives for RAF and chosen branch, how well substantiated, Sincerity, Preparation, Conviction, Enthusiasm	+	-	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
OVERALL IMPACT Force of personality, Presence, Assertiveness, Strength of impact, Reaction to pressure	+	-	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The Interview Card - Part 2

MOTIVATION

WHY RAF	WHAT BRANCHES APPLIED FOR (CHECK ANY CHANGES)
WHAT ATTRACTIONS	WHAT LENGTH COMMISSION
WHEN FIRST	WHAT OTHER BRANCHES
WHOM TALKED TO	NC0(AIR)
(CAREERS ADVICE)	HOW IMPORTANT COMMISSION
PREVIOUS VISITS - OASC WHAT CHOICES	WHAT QUALITIES REQUIRED
WHAT PERSONAL CONTACT	P3 SERVICE (IF APPROPRIATE)
WITH RAF	
WHAT DISADVANTAGES	
WHAT FAMILY ETC THINK	

SERVICE KNOWLEDGE

IOT/AITC	SECONDARY DUTIES
BRANCH(ES)/NCO(AIR)	WHERE OVERSEAS
AIRCRAFT/ROLES	WHY OVERSEAS
	NATO
WARFARE ATTITUDE	

GENERAL AWARENESS

HOW INTERESTED IN KEEPING UP TO DATE
NEWSPAPERS/TV
SIGNIFICANT EVENTS PAST YEAR - OVERSEAS/HOME
OWN VIEWS

ROUNDING OFF

INTENTIONS IF UNSUCCESSFUL
OTHER APPLICATIONS
ANY QUESTIONS: BOARD MEMBER
CANDIDATE



ANNEX D

<u>APPEARANCE AND BEARING</u> Build, Bearing, Dress, Grooming	+	Immaculate Impressive bearing Grooming	--	-	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
<u>MANNER</u> Confidence, Composure, Poise, Polish, Alertness, Sense of occasion, Humour, Courtesy	+	Confidence Polish Alertness Humour	--	-	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
<u>SPEECH AND POWER OF EXPRESSION</u> Vocabulary, Fluency, Diction, Lucidity, Logic, Conviction, Persuasiveness, Projection, Animation, Effectiveness	+	Fluency Effectiveness Animation Vocabulary	--	-	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
<u>ACTIVITIES/INTERESTS</u> Range/Type, Sense of purpose, Adventure, responsibility, Involvement, tenacity, Dedication, Determination, Initiative, Independence, Enterprise, Social awareness, Commitment, Cultural balance, Compatibility	+	Sense of purpose Involvement Commitment	--	Cultural balance Social awareness Enterprise	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
<u>ACADEMIC LEVEL/POTENTIAL</u> How well qualified for IOT/desired branch, Determination, Further potential, Ease of obtaining qualification, Attitude to studies	+	Exceptional quals Attitude to study Further potential	--	-	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
<u>PHYSICAL LEVEL/POTENTIAL</u> How well prepared physically for IOT, Fitness, Sporting Prowess, Ruggedness, Adventure, Endurance, Determination, Frequency of Exercise, Attitude to Fitness	+	Sporting prowess Frequency Attitude to fitness	--	-	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
<u>AWARENESS</u> Interests in / Awareness of military/current affairs. Maturity of views, Ability to reason, Originality of views, Relate to age	+	Intellectual argument Originality	--	Service knowledge Military awareness	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
<u>MOTIVATION</u> Motives for RAF and chosen branch, how well substantiated, Sincerity, Preparation, Conviction, Enthusiasm	+	Sincerity Enthusiasm	--	Substantiation Preparation	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
<u>OVERALL IMPACT</u> Force of personality, Presence, Assertiveness, Strength of impact, Reaction to pressure	+	Presence Force of personality Assertiveness Reaction to pressure	--	-	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ANNEX E

APPEARANCE AND BEARING Build, Bearing, Dress, Grooming	+	Strong build	Untidy Slouched	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
MANNER Confidence, Composure, Poise, Polish, Alertness, Sense of occasion, Humour, Courtesy	+	Polite	Confidence Unpolished Mild, colourless	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
SPEECH AND POWER OF EXPRESSION Vocabulary, Fluency, Diction, Lucidity, Logic, Conviction, Persuasiveness, Projection, Animation, Effectiveness	+	Projection	Fluency Obtrusive accent Mumbled - pressure	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
ACTIVITIES/INTERESTS Range/Type, Sense of purpose, Adventure, responsibility, Involvement, tenacity, Dedication, Determination, Initiative, Independence, Enterprise, Social awareness, Commitment, Cultural balance, Compatibility	+	Enterprise	Involvement Commitment Cultural balance Narrow in range (unstretched)	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
ACADEMIC LEVEL/POTENTIAL How well qualified for IOT/desired branch, Determination, Further potential, Ease of obtaining qualification, Attitude to studies	+	--	Minimum quals Drip fed Further potential	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
PHYSICAL LEVEL/POTENTIAL How well prepared physically for IOT, Fitness, Sporting Prowess, Ruggedness, Adventure, Endurance, Determination, Frequency of Exercise, Attitude to Fitness	+	--	Adventure Ruggedness Frequency of exercise	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
AWARENESS Interests in / Awareness of military/current affairs. Maturity of views, Ability to reason, Originality of views, Relate to age	+	Broad awareness	Reasoning skills Limited intellect	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
MOTIVATION Motives for RAF and chosen branch, how well substantiated, Sincerity, Preparation, Conviction, Enthusiasm	+	Keen and sincere Substantiated Conviction	--	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
OVERALL IMPACT Force of personality, Presence, Assertiveness, Strength of impact, Reaction to pressure	+	A genuine man	A 'mouse' No impact/presence Assertiveness	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Board Grades of
Recent Initial Officer Training Prize Winners
(for leadership/officer qualities)

Interview Grades

6
6
6
5
5
5
5
5
5
5
4
4
4
4
4
4
4
3
3
3
18

INTERVIEW GRADE PERCENTAGES	
Grade	%
6	1.75
5	7.2
4	22

NB. From a sample of circa 3000 candidates

